

# Neither exit nor voice : loyalty as a survival strategy for the Uzbeks in Kazakhstan

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**Neither Exit nor Voice: Loyalty as a Survival Strategy for the Uzbeks in Kazakhstan**

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**Abstract**

The June 2010 conflict between the Kyrgyz and Uzbek communities in southern Kyrgyzstan once again demonstrated the complexity of the ethnic question in Central Asia. Little is known, however, about the Uzbeks in Kazakhstan, whose settlements are concentrated in the south of the republic, in areas adjacent to Uzbekistan. What problems did the Kazakhstani Uzbeks face after the collapse of the Soviet Union and how did they seek to address these issues? This paper examines the attempts of Uzbek leaders to secure their share of power in their compact settlements and how they were co-opted or marginalized under the Nazarbaev administration. This paper shows that loyalty to the regime, not migration to the ethnic homeland or political mobilization, is an option available, and also preferable, for this ethnic minority in Kazakhstan.

**Keywords:** ethnic minority, mobilization, co-optation, Uzbeks, Kazakhstan

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The violence that erupted in southern Kyrgyzstan in June 2010 resulted in more than four hundred deaths and thousands of refugees. Six months later, the national commission appointed to investigate the incident presented the main findings of its investigation, in which the commission first of all accused former parliamentary deputy Kadyrzhan Batyrov, who agitated for Uzbeks' rights and allegedly provoked the conflict.<sup>1</sup> However, while also referring to the involvement of the family of former President Kurmanbek Bakiev, the commission failed to specify who were in fact responsible for organizing violence on such a scale; indeed, the true overall picture of this tragedy remains to be revealed. As to the "provocation" by Batyrov, what we know from the available information is that Batyrov and other Uzbek leaders welcomed the ousting of Bakiev by the second "Tulip Revolution" in April 2010, mobilized themselves in support of the provisional government, and demanded an official status for the Uzbek language and power sharing in the majority ethnic Uzbek areas of southern Kyrgyzstan.<sup>2</sup>

With this background of the tragic June 2010 incident in Kyrgyzstan in mind, this paper focuses on the Uzbeks in neighboring Kazakhstan, which hitherto has been an almost neglected topic.<sup>3</sup> By referring to the Uzbeks in Kyrgyzstan, I do not mean to imply that ethnic conflict may spread beyond the border of Kyrgyzstan. On the contrary, I argue that the June violence serves as an additional constraint on mobilization by Kazakhstani Uzbek leaders, who have been co-opted or marginalized under the Nazarbaev regime. Thus, this paper examines the attempts of Uzbek activists to achieve their share of power in their compact settlements and how these attempts were carefully blocked through coercion and co-optation. Before proceeding with this, I highlight the changes in the lives of Kazakhstani Uzbeks before and after the disintegration of the

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<sup>1</sup> "Kyrgyzstan: Natsional'naiia komissiiia po rassledovaniuu iun'skikh sobytii obnarodovala svoi vyvody," January 11, 2011, Ferghana.news [<http://www.ferghananews.com>].

<sup>2</sup> A report by the International Crisis Group (2010) is perhaps one of the earliest and most non-partisan analyses on the violence in Kyrgyzstan. A report by the commission headed by the OSCE (Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe) Parliamentary Assembly's special representative for Central Asia is expected to be forthcoming in March 2011.

<sup>3</sup> This paper is based on the author's field research conducted in South Kazakhstan *Oblast* and Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan, in March and September 2005.

Soviet Union and explain what problems they face in independent Kazakhstan, taking into account their relationship with their ethnic homeland — Uzbekistan. In conclusion, I maintain that neither making an exit nor raising their voices, but loyalty to the current regime is the only available — and preferable — option for the Uzbeks in Kazakhstan.

### A Strong Sense of Rootedness

In Central Asia, ethnic Uzbeks are the largest, and the most dispersed, community beyond the borders of Uzbekistan. In Tajikistan, Uzbeks have, since Soviet times, constituted the second largest ethnic group after the Tajiks. In Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Uzbeks have outnumbered ethnic Russians and are now in second place. The Uzbeks in Kazakhstan hold a relatively small share of the whole population (2.9 percent in 2009) but today constitute the third largest group in the republic.<sup>4</sup> Uzbeks in neighboring republics residing in areas adjacent to Uzbekistan consider themselves indigenous to these lands<sup>5</sup> and overwhelmingly remained in their states of residence after the disintegration of the Soviet state.

The Uzbeks in the south of Kazakhstan also have a strong sense of rootedness in their territory. Indeed, while they found themselves outside of “their own” republic due to the administrative border created under Soviet rule, the Uzbek communities in Kazakhstan stress that they have been living on these lands for centuries. The southern portion of contemporary Kazakhstan was part of *Mā warā’ al-nahr* (Transoxiana), a rich oasis zone sandwiched between the Amu and Syr rivers which included the ancient cities of Samarkand and Bukhara. Historically, this region was an important place of commerce between oasis farmers and nomads. Under the Russian Empire, this area fell under the jurisdiction of the Turkestan General-Governorship, which included a major part of the present territory of Uzbekistan, and on the basis of which the Turkestan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic was established after the October Revolution. It

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<sup>4</sup> According to the 2009 census of the Republic of Kazakhstan, the number of ethnic Uzbeks was 456,997.

<sup>5</sup> On strong indigenous claims by Uzbeks in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, see Fumagalli (2007a).

was in the mid-1920s that this land became a part of Kazakhstan by national-territorial delimitation.

During the Soviet period, the Uzbeks in southern Kazakhstan most probably did not feel that they lived outside of their “homeland,” as they belonged *de facto* to the cultural, social, and economic space of the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic. The central and largest city of this area is Uzbekistan’s capital Tashkent, which is less than a two-hour drive (120 kilometers) from the South Kazakhstan *Oblast* (province) center Shymkent. Upon graduation from Uzbek-medium local schools, those who wished to receive a higher education in their native language went to Tashkent or to other cities in the Uzbek SSR. Many students remained there and joined the ranks of Uzbekistan’s party apparatus.<sup>6</sup> Thus, if Uzbeks wanted to enjoy the privilege of being members of the titular ethnicity, they could move relatively easily to the neighboring republic, without cutting themselves off from their hometowns.

With the exception of native language schools, the Uzbeks in the Kazakh SSR did not necessarily require their own ethnic institutions within the republic to satisfy their cultural needs. Although an *oblast* newspaper printed in Shymkent in the 1920s was abolished in 1936 and an Uzbek theater (established in 1934) was closed in 1941,<sup>7</sup> this lack of cultural institutions was not a serious inconvenience to the Kazakhstani Uzbeks. Visiting Tashkent was no problem; they could subscribe to newspapers from Uzbekistan and enjoy Uzbek TV and radio programs broadcast from Uzbekistan without difficulty.

Under Gorbachev’s perestroika, among the Uzbek populations residing outside the border of the Uzbek SSR, ethnic movements in general — not to mention demands for territorial autonomy — did not become active. Here, the lack of ethnic institutions (with the exception of Uzbek-medium schools) appears to have restricted the resources from which Uzbeks could draw to mobilize (Fumagalli 2007a: 571-572).<sup>8</sup> In addition,

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<sup>6</sup> In interviews by the author, local Uzbeks proudly commented that South Kazakhstan *Oblast* produced dozens of members of Uzbekistan’s political elite in Soviet times.

<sup>7</sup> Interview with Z. Mominzhanov, Director of the Uzbek Drama Theater, March 6, 2005. See also *Kazakhstanskaia pravda*, December 23, 2003.

<sup>8</sup> On the importance of ethnic institutions for ethno-national mobilization in the former Soviet

the Uzbek community in Kazakhstan did not have its own intelligentsia who functioned as key political actors in ethnic movements during the perestroika era. This was a natural development because many Uzbek pupils in southern Kazakhstan found it best to pursue their higher education in the Uzbek SSR. Those who aspired to become scholars, particularly in the humanities, such as the Uzbek history, literature, language, and culture, essentially chose to remain there.

Writings on the Uzbeks in Kazakhstan are extremely limited compared to those on other minorities. This suggests that the Uzbeks were not fully considered to be an ethnic minority within Kazakhstan, or else that they had not identified themselves as such. One of the few works written by an Uzbek is *The Uzbeks of Kazakhstan* published in 2008, an encyclopaedia of well-known ethnic Uzbeks who were born or worked in Kazakhstan. The author, Said Tursunmetov, stressed that the book also contains information that corroborates three-thousand-year-long history of the Uzbeks' residence in Kazakhstan.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, the Uzbeks' claim to indigenous status appears to be accepted by the authorities of Kazakhstan.<sup>10</sup> This is an interesting exception to Kazakhstan's official interpretation of history, according to which the current borders of the republic "correspond completely to the historically formed area of habitation of the Kazakh people" (Natsional'nyi sovet po gosudarstvennoi politike 1996: 25-26).

### Alienation from Ethnic Homeland

While the Uzbeks in Kazakhstan retained their indigenous identity after the dissolution of the USSR, the increasing restrictions on cross-border contacts and the severance of educational and informational networks in the post-Soviet period have forced the

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Union, see Gorenburg (2003).

<sup>9</sup> "Kazakhstan: V dekabre v svet vykhodit entsiklopediia 'Uzbeki Kazakhstana'," November 24, 2008, Fergana.news [http://www.fergananews.com]. Tursunmetov was Chairman of the Union of Uzbek Youth and also a member of the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan, a presidential consultative body chaired by President Nazarbaev himself. As Tursunmetov declared that the encyclopaedia, printed in three languages (Uzbek, Kazakh, and Russian) would be given to the presidents and high-ranking officials as well as parliamentary deputies of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, this book project appears to be approved and possibly supported by the government of Kazakhstan.

<sup>10</sup> In the author's conversation with officials from the South Kazakhstan *Oblast* administration, they also supported this point of view.

Uzbeks, for almost the first time, to face the issue of minority status. However, this has not resulted in mass migration of the Uzbeks to Uzbekistan. In addition to the higher standard of living in Kazakhstan, the lack of a welcoming attitude on the part of the government of Uzbekistan toward its ethnic brethren also contributed to the Uzbeks decision to remain in Kazakhstan.

Unlike in the Russian Federation, the issue of ethnic kin abroad has almost never been seriously discussed in Uzbekistan. The lack of an Uzbekistani policy toward co-ethnics is most evident in the total absence of programs or legislation in Uzbekistan targeting ethnic Uzbeks abroad. The Citizenship Law (adopted and enforced in July 1992) obliges an applicant to relinquish any foreign citizenship, to permanently reside in the Republic of Uzbekistan for more than ten years (or to have a parent or grandparent who was born in Uzbekistan), and to have a legal source of income (Article 17). The law also stipulates that in exceptional cases, compatriots,<sup>11</sup> i.e., foreign citizens who themselves, or whose parents or grandparents were “once forced to leave [their] homeland due to the regime that existed at that time,” can obtain Uzbekistani citizenship in addition to their current citizenship (Article 10). Thus, Uzbekistan officially allows dual citizenship for those who have historic ties to the state. The overwhelming majority of Uzbek communities outside the present territory of Uzbekistan, however, are not descendants of refugees from Uzbekistan and thus are not eligible for this privilege.<sup>12</sup>

Matteo Fumagalli (2007b) is adamant that Uzbekistan has no diaspora policy whatsoever. He contends that ethnicity, or concern for co-ethnics living on the other side of the border, carries little explanatory power for Uzbekistan’s foreign policy toward neighboring countries with substantial Uzbek minorities — namely, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. Fumagalli attributes the marginalization of Uzbeks abroad in political discourse to two policy priorities, namely, “stability and security discourse, which differentiates sharply between internal stability and external disorder” and “mutual tacit

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<sup>11</sup> “*Sootchestvenniki*” in the original text in Russian.

<sup>12</sup> If anything, whether or not one is entitled to the compatriot status stipulated by the citizenship law does not seem to matter very much. “Exceptional” recognition of dual citizenship is the only preferential treatment available to compatriots, and for the dual citizenship system to actually function, agreements with other states are required.



accords between Central Asian states not to meddle with each other's minorities" (2007b: 115-116).

For the ruling elites in Tashkent, state-building and security assumed greater importance than establishing and/or developing links with Uzbeks abroad. The Karimov administration has often seen its co-ethnics living in foreign states as objects of control, not as people who need protection from Uzbekistan.<sup>13</sup> Uzbekistan has been troubled by repeated attacks by armed insurgents, including among others the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), that aim to overthrow the Karimov regime. The leadership appears to suspect Uzbek communities abroad of being collaborators or potential supporters of these insurgents who, the government believes, hide in neighboring states. As Fumagalli suggests, "[t]he fact that Uzbeks, especially young males, are seen (rightly or wrongly) as the most likely recruits for underground movements such as Hizb-ut Tahrir and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan is a serious source of concern for Uzbekistani authorities" (2007b: 115).<sup>14</sup>

Border closures, the introduction of tighter passport regimes, and more intrusive customs checks — policies adopted by the Uzbekistani authorities in order to prevent incursions by enemies from outside — have aroused the antipathy of Uzbeks living in neighboring countries. Nick Megoran's in-depth interviews revealed a sense of exclusion among the Uzbeks in southern Kyrgyzstan: "The experience of being turned away, or treated with suspicion, or humiliated at the border by people of the same *millat* [nation] was generally traumatic for Uzbeks" (2007: 271). Their inability to attend family ceremonies such as weddings or funerals organized on the other side of the

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<sup>13</sup> The government's intention to eliminate figures hostile to the state is obviously to blame for the long delays in the acquisition of Uzbekistani citizenship, but the unwelcoming attitude toward ethnic kin abroad can be also explained by another factor — demography. Uzbekistan has the largest population of any Central Asian country, and that population is young and rapidly growing. The government faces economic difficulties and high unemployment, and so cannot afford to accept new immigrants.

<sup>14</sup> Southern Kazakhstan has reportedly seen a rise in activity among banned religious movements such as Hizb ut-Tahrir, a movement seeking to create an Islamic state by political means. International Crisis Group (2003: 18) attributes this activity primarily to the ethnic Uzbeks, both locals and those from Uzbekistan. Informants to this author also testified that there were indeed Uzbeks among the ranks of Hizb ut-Tahrir and that they were critical of the Karimov regime, but at the time of interview, they were not disproportionately represented (Interview, March 2005).

border was particularly distressing. The Uzbeks in Kazakhstan were no exception.

In the early years following independence, crossing the border between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan was quite easy, but since the end of the 1990s, border control has tightened. Despite a visa-free movement regime between the states, a Kazakhstani citizen cannot cross the border (by land) with only a passport.<sup>15</sup> When the author visited Sarylgash *Raion* (district) of South Kazakhstan *Oblast* in March 2005, a resident of the borderland village Zhibek Zholy recounted how she used to visit the Uzbekistani side of the border quite often, but now she does so only once a year. Every time she goes to a hospital (geographically closest to her village) or visits her relatives in Uzbekistan, she needs to certify the reason for her visit and provide written documentation to prove it.<sup>16</sup>

Despite their strong attachment to their territory of residence, in the first half of the 1990s, some of the Uzbeks in southern Kazakhstan did move to Uzbekistan, where living conditions were relatively more stable than in Kazakhstan's periphery at that time. This migration trend, however, did not continue and was soon reversed. This can be ascribed, first, to the lack of Uzbekistani policy aimed at the "repatriation" of co-ethnics as noted above, and second, to the decreasing incentives to move to Uzbekistan for the Uzbeks in Kazakhstan. Because many of them had relatives on the other side of the border, the Uzbeks in Kazakhstan inevitably compared their own lives to those of their co-ethnics in Uzbekistan. In the eyes of the Kazakhstani Uzbeks, the increasing gap in economic development between the two states was as clear as day. The extreme enthusiasm with which the Uzbekistani leadership prioritized security was also not popular. A common observation made by Uzbeks interviewed by the author was: "There are more policemen than pedestrians in Tashkent." An activist from the Uzbek Cultural Center compared the heads of the two states as follows: "In Tashkent, I was caught in a trolley bus for twenty minutes while President Karimov went through. But President

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<sup>15</sup> According to Ol'ga Dosybieva, a Shymkent-based journalist who actively covered border issues, until around 1998 it was enough to show an internal identity card (*udostoverenie*) to cross the border into Uzbekistan, but later it became necessary to carry a passport. Interview, March 17, 2005.

<sup>16</sup> Despite increasingly strict border control measures, illegal border crossings were in fact rampant.

Nazarbaev danced with us during his visit to our *oblast*. We are fortunate with the president.”

### Language Issue

The Kazakhstani government shows a certain amount of consideration for Uzbeks’ cultural needs by providing them with primary education and media outlets in their native language. These ethnic institutions are an inheritance from the Soviet Union, but some had been abolished and were revived in independent Kazakhstan. If subscribing to periodicals from Uzbekistan was no problem in Soviet times, it became difficult after independence due to soaring subscription fees and the collapse of the unified distribution system. Therefore, the role of the Uzbek media within Kazakhstan has grown, in particular in rural areas, where the Uzbeks have less proficiency in Russian and Kazakh and wish to access information in their native language.

As of 2006, there were three state-owned Uzbek language newspapers in Kazakhstan: an *oblast* newspaper *Janubiy Qozoghiston* (Southern Kazakhstan)<sup>17</sup> published in Shymkent and two local papers printed in Turkestan and in Sairam *Raion*,<sup>18</sup> all inherited from the Soviet period. The *oblast* newspaper, which had ceased to exist in 1936, was revived shortly before the Soviet break-up (April 1991). In March 2003, the Oblast Uzbek Drama Theater, which was established in 1934 and functioned until World War II, was re-opened in Sairam *Raion* by resolution of the *oblast* administration. The opening ceremony of the theater, attended by President Nazarbaev, was effectively used as a demonstration of the state’s concern for the Uzbek minority.<sup>19</sup>

As mentioned above, the Uzbeks in Kazakhstan had the option of receiving a higher education in their native language in Uzbekistan, but this became difficult after the Soviet collapse. In addition to the much greater financial expense of studying

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<sup>17</sup> The newspaper has held this name since 1998. Interview with Said Tursunmetov, Deputy Editor, *Janubiy Qozoghiston*, March 5, 2005.

<sup>18</sup> The Uzbek newspaper in Turkestan is a *perevodnaia*, i. e., a translation from the Kazakh language paper. The newspaper in Sairam *Raion*, established in 1932, has printed its own articles in Uzbek, except for the period from 1966 through 1990 when it was also a *perevodnaia* paper. Interview with Iusufzhan Saidaliev, editor-in-chief of *Sairam Sadosi*, September 20, 2005.

<sup>19</sup> *Kazakhstanskaia pravda*, December 23, 2003.

“abroad,” the curriculum and even alphabet taught in Uzbek-medium schools in Kazakhstan have become distinct from those in Uzbekistan. Until 1998, Uzbekistan’s Ministry of Education provided textbooks for Uzbek-medium schools in neighboring countries, offering pupils the standard educational program of Uzbekistan.<sup>20</sup> Afterwards, however, this policy was abandoned and the government of Kazakhstan began to print its own textbooks for Uzbek-medium schools.<sup>21</sup> Meanwhile, Kazakhstan’s language policy toward Uzbek-medium schools swung during the 1990s, which, naturally, caused great confusion. Following the introduction of the Latin alphabet in Uzbekistan in 1993,<sup>22</sup> first-year pupils in Kazakhstan began to study using the new alphabet; in 1997, however, a decision was made by the Kazakhstani authorities to return to Cyrillic. Opinions were divided within the Uzbek community as to which alphabet should be used for the Uzbek language.

Those who studied in Uzbek schools also find themselves disadvantaged when they try to continue their study within Kazakhstan.<sup>23</sup> In 2004, the government of Kazakhstan introduced a unified national examination for university entrance which could be administered in either Kazakh or Russian. Parents could select between two suboptimal choices: to send their children to a Russian or Kazakh school, or else let them study in their native language — a choice that would put them at a disadvantage in competition for higher education. Thus, the Uzbeks insist that graduates of

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<sup>20</sup> In the 1990s, the Central Asian republics had an agreement to provide each other with textbooks in their respective national languages. Interview with a former high-ranking official of Uzbekistan, September 12, 2005.

<sup>21</sup> Tursnai Ismailova, who had worked for the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Uzbekistan as a leading specialist in charge of Uzbek schools in Kazakhstan in 1994-1998, explained the abolition of the common educational program from the perspectives of both Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. Several bomb blasts in Tashkent in February 1999 made national security a top priority for Uzbekistan, leaving other issues short-changed, while the Kazakhstani government increasingly wished to print its own textbooks for its citizens (Interview, September 21, 2005).

<sup>22</sup> Although Cyrillic is still widely used, school education has completely shifted to the Latin script.

<sup>23</sup> The only Uzbek-medium institution of higher education in Kazakhstan, the Uzbek-Kazakh Engineering-Humanities University, opened in 1999. This private university has campuses in areas of compact Uzbek settlement — Shymkent, Turkestan, and Sairam *Raion*. According to one of the founders of the university, however, as of 2005, the main language of instruction was, contrary to the original idea, Kazakh, and the university's quality of education was highly questionable. Interview with Rakhimbai Begaliev, September 20, 2005.

Uzbek-medium schools should be allowed to take the unified national examination for university entrance in their native language.

Thanks to their geographic proximity to Uzbekistan, compact settlements within Kazakhstan, and primary education in their native language, an overwhelming majority of the Uzbeks in Kazakhstan have preserved the language of their nationality (97.0 percent according to the national census in 1999). The Nazarbaev administration boasts of its multiculturalism and tolerance by emphasizing the number of Uzbek-medium schools and media outlets in the Uzbek language in the territory of Kazakhstan. Diminishing educational and informational networks with Uzbekistan, however, mean that, from the perspective of higher education and as a source of information, the usefulness of the Uzbek language has greatly decreased.

#### Marginalization and Co-optation of Uzbek Leaders

With a strong sense of rootedness, a high degree of ethnic density, and the proximity of their settlements to the ethnic homeland, it is tempting to assume that the Uzbeks in Kazakhstan are likely to demand ethnic rights or even some form of independence.<sup>24</sup> However, there has been no movement among the Uzbeks to call for redrawing the border between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, or to claim territorial autonomy in the south of the republic. Instead, the Uzbeks have demanded greater power-sharing in Kazakhstan, but these efforts were contained through coercion and co-optation by the central government and local authorities.

The Uzbek movement did not enjoy nationwide significance due to the small percentage of Uzbeks in Kazakhstan's population and their geographical concentration in the south of the republic. However, its very localization constitutes a potential source of power for the Uzbek movement; Uzbek activists could make good use of their compact settlements for mobilization with the aim of raising ethnic demands. Thus, both central and local authorities were wary of an independent movement of Uzbeks to

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<sup>24</sup> See Bremmer (1994: 264) for an analytical framework of the possible correlation between "ethnic attachment" (ethnic density, rootedness, proximity to ethnic homeland, etc.) and the options selected by ethnic minorities.

support any candidates for political office.

The center of the Uzbek movement in Kazakhstan has traditionally been South Kazakhstan *Oblast*, where the Uzbek population is most concentrated (89.6 percent of the total population in 1999). Kazakhstani specialists have pointed out that the Uzbeks in the south of the country have been underrepresented in state organs at a variety of levels, in proportion to their share in the total population (Kurganskaia and Dunaev 2002: 223; Savin 2001: 286-287). This was substantiated by multiple interviews conducted by the author in compact Uzbek settlements in the south of Kazakhstan. Even those who held official positions and thus would rather avoid criticism of the authorities complained, or at least admitted, that Uzbeks' representation was weak.<sup>25</sup>

To address this issue, the Uzbeks have lobbied for increased numbers of Uzbeks in the *oblast* administration and launched election campaigns for *maslikhats* (local assemblies). At the republican level, they have made attempts to secure seats in the *Mazhilis* (lower chamber of the parliament), among others, from an electoral district in Sairam *Raion*, the area with the largest share of the Uzbek population (43.1 percent in 1999). In the 1995 *Mazhilis* elections, Sadridin Mukhiddinov, head of Karabulak rural district (*sel'skii okrug*) stood from the *raion*, but was defeated and then moved to Uzbekistan.<sup>26</sup> While the details of Mukhiddinov's failed electoral attempts are not available, the case of Ikram Khashimzhanov, Chairman of the Uzbek Cultural Center of South Kazakhstan *Oblast*,<sup>27</sup> provides an explicit example of the authorities' carrot-and-stick strategy. Khashimzhanov ran for the 1999 *Mazhilis* election from the cultural center. Before the election, he was once de-registered by the district election

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<sup>25</sup> For example, an official in Sairam *Raion* testified that only three out of fifty (6.0 percent) deputies of South Kazakhstan *Oblast* were ethnic Uzbeks (interview, March 5, 2005). According to one of the founders of the Uzbek Cultural Center in Turkestan, Uzbeks held a mere three seats out of eighteen (16.7 percent) at the city *maslikhat* (interview, September 22, 2005). According to the 1999 national census, Uzbeks comprised 16.8 percent of the total population in South Kazakhstan *Oblast*, and 42.7 percent in the city of Turkestan.

<sup>26</sup> According to an Uzbek activist, Mukhiddinov was forced to leave Kazakhstan by his opponent who viewed him as a nuisance. Interview with Abdumalik Sarmanov, September 16, 2005.

<sup>27</sup> The center was established in November 1989 as the Uzbek Cultural Center of Shymkent City and reorganized into an *oblast* center in 1992. Khashimzhanov has held the chairmanship since June 1999. For general information about the Uzbek Cultural Center of South Kazakhstan *Oblast*, see Malaia assambleia narodov Iuzhno-Kazakhstanskoi oblasti (2004: 52-55).

committee but managed to restore his candidacy through the courts (in the end he was defeated). His fellow Uzbeks differ in their interpretation of the de-registration; one commentator believes that an Uzbek candidate nominated from the Uzbek community on their own initiative incurred the wrath of the *oblast* administration, while another maintains that the authorities simply wished “their own” candidate to be elected, irrespective of nationality.<sup>28</sup> In 2003, Khashimzhanov stood for the *oblast maslikhat*, but this time he himself withdrew his candidacy before the election. In exchange for this decision, Khashimzhanov was offered the post of village *akim* (head) in Sairam *Raion*.<sup>29</sup>

In the 2004 September-October *Mazhilis* election, two Uzbek candidates from Electoral District 63, composed primarily of Sairam *Raion*, were de-registered due to comments they made that allegedly incited ethnic hostility.<sup>30</sup> These candidates were non-partisan Abdumalik Sarmanov, a journalist and the then editor-in-chief of the *oblast* Uzbek newspaper *Janubiy Qozoghiston*, and Sultan Abdiraimov from the oppositional *Ak Zhol* (Bright Path) Party.<sup>31</sup> According to Sarmanov, he was charged with instigating ethnic hatred in his election program, which demanded that Uzbek pupils take a unified university entrance exam in their native language, and that the Latin script be used for the Uzbek language in Kazakhstan. After his candidacy was annulled on the 27<sup>th</sup> of August, Sarmanov joined the camp of Abdiraimov, and they formed a unified front. Three days prior to the election date, however, Abdiraimov was also de-registered on the grounds that he intended to incite ethnic tension with the slogan “We are many, if we unite, we will win,” which actually was translated into Uzbek from the official slogan used by *Ak Zhol* and had no ethnic connotation.<sup>32</sup>

Sarmanov clearly targeted the Uzbek electorate in his constituency, but his

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<sup>28</sup> Interview with activists in Shymkent, September 12 and 16, 2005.

<sup>29</sup> Several months later Khashimzhanov lost this position.

<sup>30</sup> The Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan prohibits the creation and activity of public associations (*obshchestvennye ob"edineniia*) that kindle ethnic, religious, and other hostility (Article 5.3)

<sup>31</sup> The de-registration of the two Uzbek candidates is critically referred to in the OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission Report (OSCE/ODIHR 2004: 18).

<sup>32</sup> Interview with Abdumalik Sarmanov, September 14, 2005. Sarmanov also stated that he was asked to withdraw his candidacy in exchange for money.

election program could not be viewed as extreme or radical.<sup>33</sup> As mentioned above, the Uzbek alphabet was once changed to the Latin script in the 1990s, and Sarmanov simply demanded its reintroduction. Another salient issue on which Sarmanov lobbied was actually later raised by Rozakul Khalmuradov, a high-ranking official of South Kazakhstan *Oblast*, without any problem. In June 2005, in his capacity as president of the Republican Association of Social Unions of the Uzbeks *Dostlik*,<sup>34</sup> Khalmuradov petitioned President Nazarbaev to take measures allowing Uzbek pupils to take the examination for university entrance in their native language.<sup>35</sup> Thus, the minority language question was not a taboo subject in Kazakhstan. Rather, the elimination of Sarmanov in the 2004 *Mazhilis* election suggests that issues related to a particular ethnic group could not be raised within the context of elections. Instead, they could be brought to the authorities' attention by officially sanctioned ethnic leaders.

At any rate, Sarmanov's chance of success would not have been very high even if he were allowed to participate in the elections. The winner in Electoral District 63 was Satybaldy Ibragimov, a "friend of Nazarbaev," an ethnic Kazakh nominated by the pro-president *Otan* (Fatherland) Party.<sup>36</sup> By the time of the 2004 *Mazhilis* election, most of the Uzbek activists as well as community leaders had become members of *Otan* and other pro-president parties. The Uzbek Cultural Center of South Kazakhstan *Oblast*, headed by Khashimzhanov, himself a member of *Otan*, appealed to the Uzbek community to vote for Ibragimov, while distancing itself from the co-ethnic opposition

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<sup>33</sup> The case of Sarmanov makes an interesting contrast to the electoral success of Davron Sabirov, head of the Society of Uzbeks in Osh, Kyrgyzstan, and a candidate for the 2000 parliamentary elections. Despite clear evidence that Sabirov indeed appealed to ethno-nationalist sentiments among the Uzbek voters and thus could have been de-registered on the grounds that he violated the law, he was finally allowed to run and won 65 percent of the votes in his district. During the electoral campaign, Sabirov also proposed to shift to a Latin script for the Uzbek language. For details, see Fumagalli (2007a: 584-586).

<sup>34</sup> *Dostlik* was established in 1996. Since the summer of 2003, Khalmuradov has headed this organization. He held important positions in the South Kazakhstan *Oblast* administration.

<sup>35</sup> Information provided by Ol'ga Dosybieva, an independent journalist in Shymkent, September 2005.

<sup>36</sup> *Otan* renamed itself *Nur Otan* in 2006. Since its establishment in 1999, the *de facto* head of the party was President Nazarbaev. In 2007, Nazarbaev formally assumed the chairmanship of *Nur Otan* following the abolition of a constitutional provision that prohibited the participation of an incumbent president in political party activities.



candidates. Among the Uzbek electorate, it is possible that a good portion of them placed their hopes in someone who had close ties with the president, rather than co-ethnic candidates with little political influence under the current regime. Indeed, during the election campaign, Ibragimov launched a variety of “philanthropic” activities in his constituency and made promises to the local community, such as financial support for the Uzbek-medium schools.

A couple of years after the failed attempts of Sarmanov and Abdiarimov to run in the *Mazhilis* election, a Uzbek deputy was elected “from above,” without mobilization of the Uzbek community. The constitutional amendments of May 2007 stipulated that nine seats in the lower chamber of the parliament were to be filled from within the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan, a presidential consultative body that consists of representatives of officially sanctioned ethnic associations and the state organs. In August of that year, nine candidates, including Khalmuradov, were nominated by the Assembly and chosen without competition.<sup>37</sup> Yet the “election” of Khalmuradov, whose role as the president of *Dostlik* was largely symbolic, without the participation of the Uzbek electorate is not meaningless for the Uzbek community: Khalmuradov is expected to act as an intermediary who can provide fellow Uzbeks with access to the local and central administrations if they wish to appeal to the authorities.

### Conclusion

With “their own” Soviet republic becoming a foreign state, the Uzbeks in Kazakhstan, for practically the first time, faced the fact that they were an ethnic minority. If in Soviet times their access to positions and opportunities in Uzbekistan diminished the issue of power sharing within Kazakhstan, in independent Kazakhstan the Uzbeks became increasingly dissatisfied with under-representation in government bodies and the legislature. Attempts by Uzbek activists to appeal for support from their community through elections, however, were suppressed by local and central authorities who were on the alert for possible Uzbek mobilization. At the same time, the Nazarbaev administration successfully co-opted Uzbek leaders by offering them posts, positions,

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<sup>37</sup> For details of the constitutional changes and parliamentary elections in 2007, see Oka (2009).

and other privileges, thereby turning them into loyal clients of the regime. By the time of the 2004 *Mazhilis* election, an overwhelming majority of Uzbek elites joined the ranks of pro-president parties and supported a candidate of the ruling party, not co-ethnic opposition candidates.

Further research is required to examine what impact the tragedy in southern Kyrgyzstan had on the psychology of Kazakhstan's Uzbeks. It can be assumed, however, that their preference for the status quo has remained or even strengthened since the time of the author's field research in 2005. The majority of Uzbeks perhaps seek stability more than ever and prefer the incumbent president to a new one whose attitude toward ethnic minorities is unknown. Under these circumstances, Uzbek opposition activists (if they are still active at all) have little choice but to restrain themselves from raising ethnic demands, thereby inviting accusations of "instigating ethnic hatred" or being labeled as "Kazakhstan's Batyrov."

The upcoming early presidential elections in April 2011 will serve as another opportunity for the Uzbek leaders to demonstrate their loyalty to President Nazarbaev. With other options not available *de facto*, support for the incumbent leader, whose electoral victory is almost guaranteed under the current political system, is the most secure and rational strategy for the Uzbek minority in Kazakhstan.

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